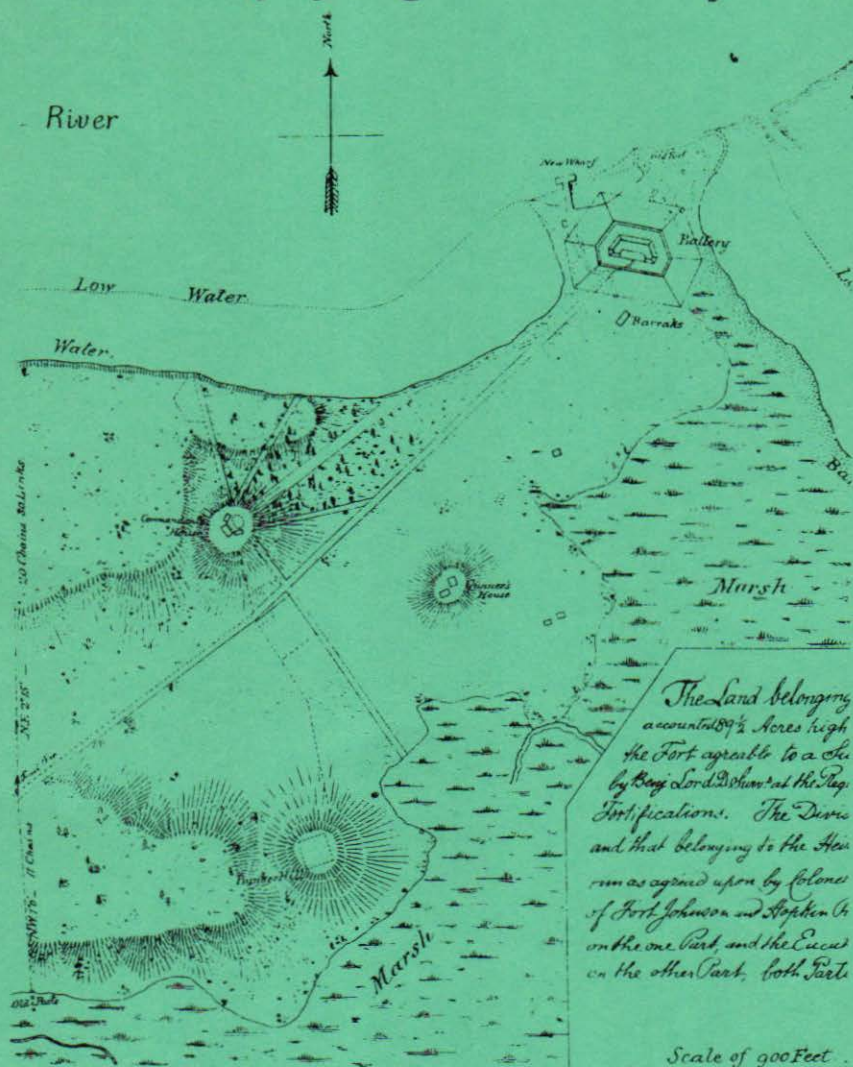


Fort Johnson is More Than Fish: Enjoying its History



Chicora Foundation, Inc.
1994

© 1994 by Chicora Foundation, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transcribed in any form without permissions of Chicora Foundation, Inc. except for brief quotations used in reviews.

Chicora Foundation, Inc.
P.O. Box 8664 ■ 861 Arbutus Drive
Columbia, South Carolina 29202-8664
803/787-6910

A Short History of Fort Johnson

While often overshadowed by Forts Sumter and Moultrie, Fort Johnson has played a part in the defence of Charleston during the French and Indian War, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. But in spite of the many adversaries it has faced, the most damaging enemy has always been time and the ocean. Today much of the original fortifications have been eroded away while other parts have been lost to development.

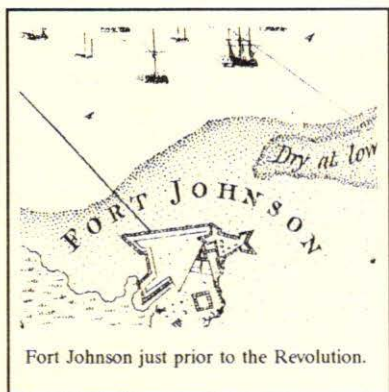
The first fort was built in 1708 as a response to the vulnerability of the colony during Queen Anne's War. While no good records of this first fort still exist, some historians believe that it was triangular in form with bastions at each corner and a moat on the land side. Before this the property, known as Windmill Point was the plantation of William Russell and later John King. During this early period the lands were being cultivated, possibly for indigo or subsistence crops like corn.



By 1724 the fort was already showing signs of serious deterioration and the process of neglect, inadequate repair, and disinterest was already established. The next major renovation was the 1759 tabby fort built in anticipation of French or Spanish attack during the French and Indian War. Tabby is a mixture of burned shells (which forms lime, serving as the binder), whole oyster shells (serving as the aggregate), mixed with water to form a slurry. Poured in forms and allowed to harden it is a good building material, but does not fair well when exposed to either cannon fire or the undermining effects of the tides.

As the threat subsided so too did the enthusiasm of the Assembly to pay for the work and construction was apparently never completed. Although no copy of the original plan can today be identified, a contemporary map shows an eccentric plan which suggests that he may have had access to the plans and simply incorporated them into the map.

At the beginning of the American Revolution Fort Johnson was seized



by the Council of Safety and held until 1780 when the British General, Henry Clinton, laid siege to the city. The fort was blown up by the Colonists before the fort was abandoned.

An effort was made after the American Revolution to once again upgrade the defensive works and a new fort was built just west of the old ones. Efforts were made to maintain this fort, but when the threat posed by the War of 1812 was realized Fort Johnson was once again little more than a pile of rubble.

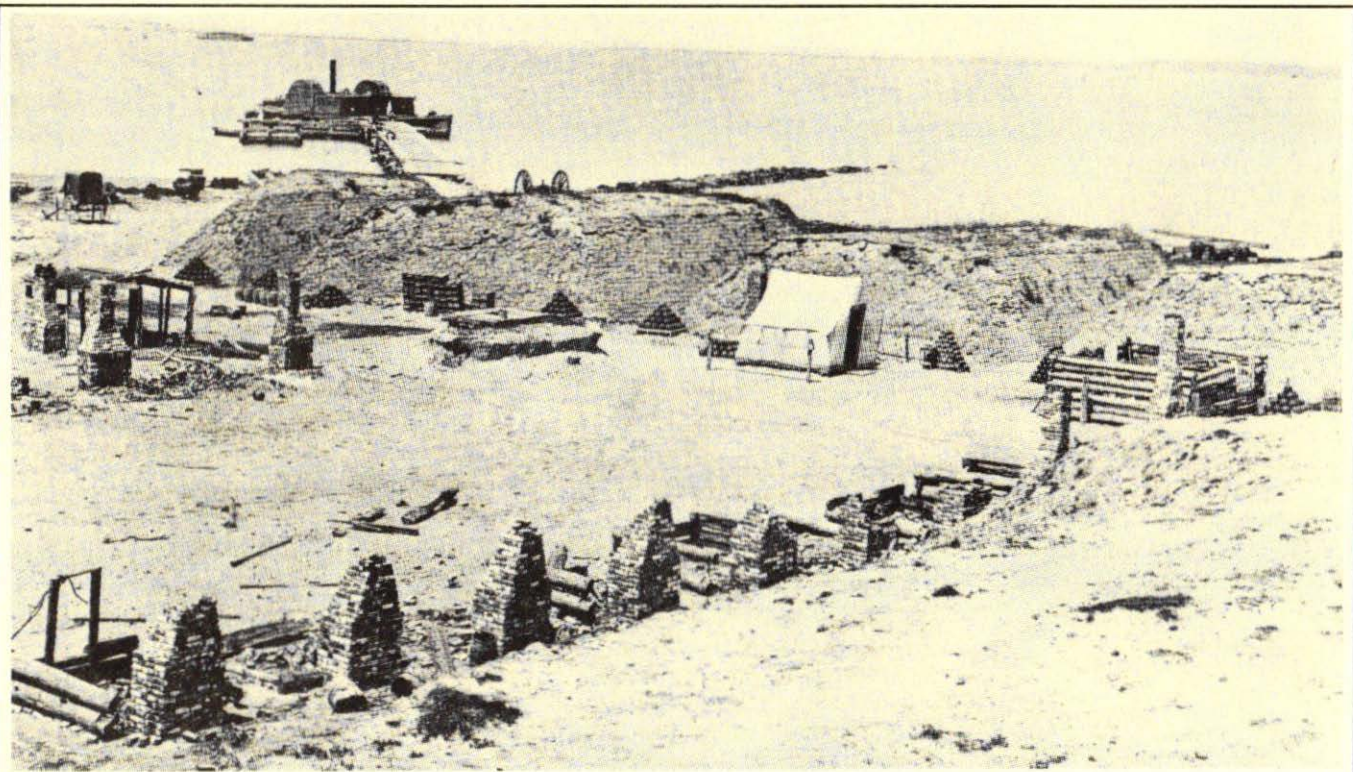
The new batteries constructed in 1812 to protect the harbor entrance were almost immediately destroyed by the August 1813 hurricane. Accounts from 1827 indicate that almost nothing remained of the fort.

Rather than once again rebuild the fort, a martello tower was constructed southwest of the old forts, along with barracks for the men and officers. These towers, with massive brick walls and having a platform on top for one or two guns, were thought at the time to be great defensive value. The James Island martello tower stood at least until the early part of the Civil War.

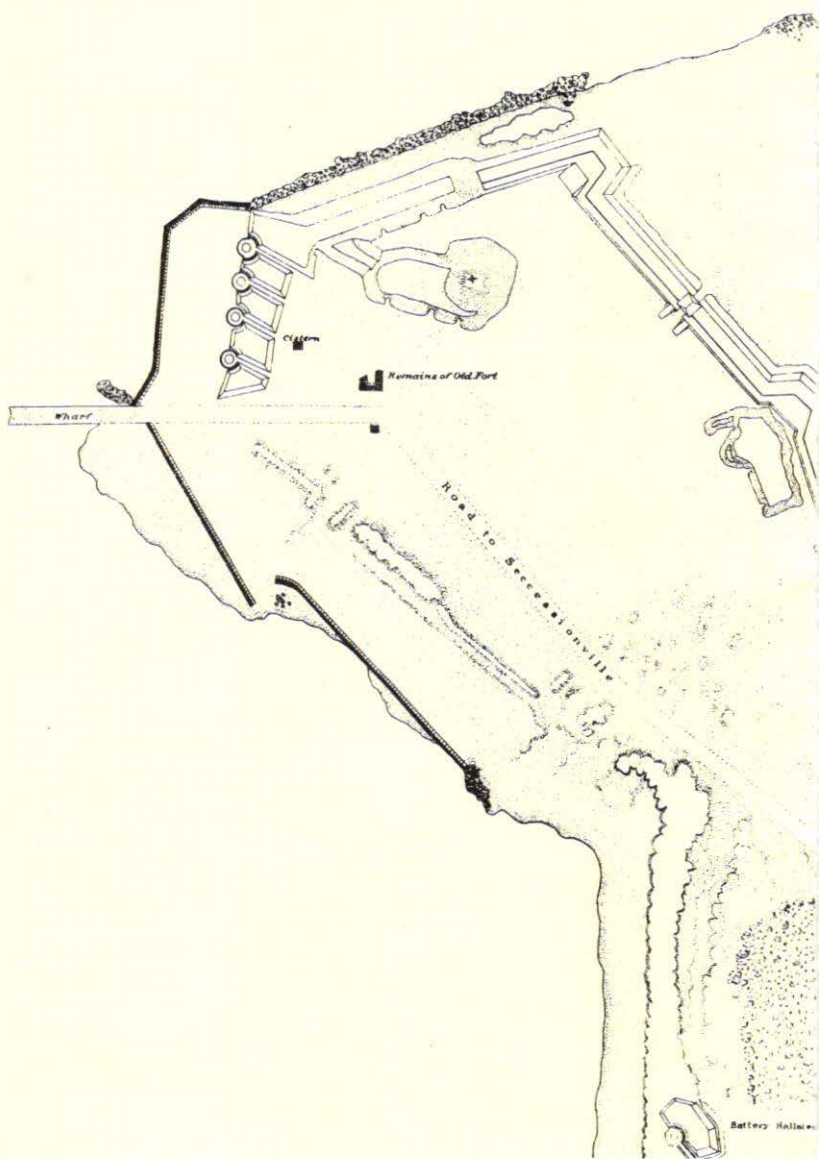
Although there were occasional proposals to reactivate Fort Johnson's more massive defenses little was actually done until the post was seized by the Confederate forces for the construction of a mortar battery. On 4:00 on the morning of April 12, 1861, a shell from this battery exploded over Fort Sumter, signalling the bombardment of the Union fort and the beginning of the Civil War.

Over the next several years Fort Johnson was considerably strengthened. Outposts were established, including Battery Simpkins on the southeast, Battery Glover on the west, and Battery Wampler, near the old martello tower. In all there were at least 26 guns and mortars at the various batteries. In addition, an extensive entrenched camp was constructed at Fort Johnson including bombproofs, officers and enlisted quarters, and magazines. The only real action Fort Johnson saw during the Civil War was on July 3, 1864 when Union forces landed between Battery Simpkins and Fort Johnson. Although the Union forces fought their way into parts of the defensive system they were forced to surrender when no reinforcements were forthcoming.

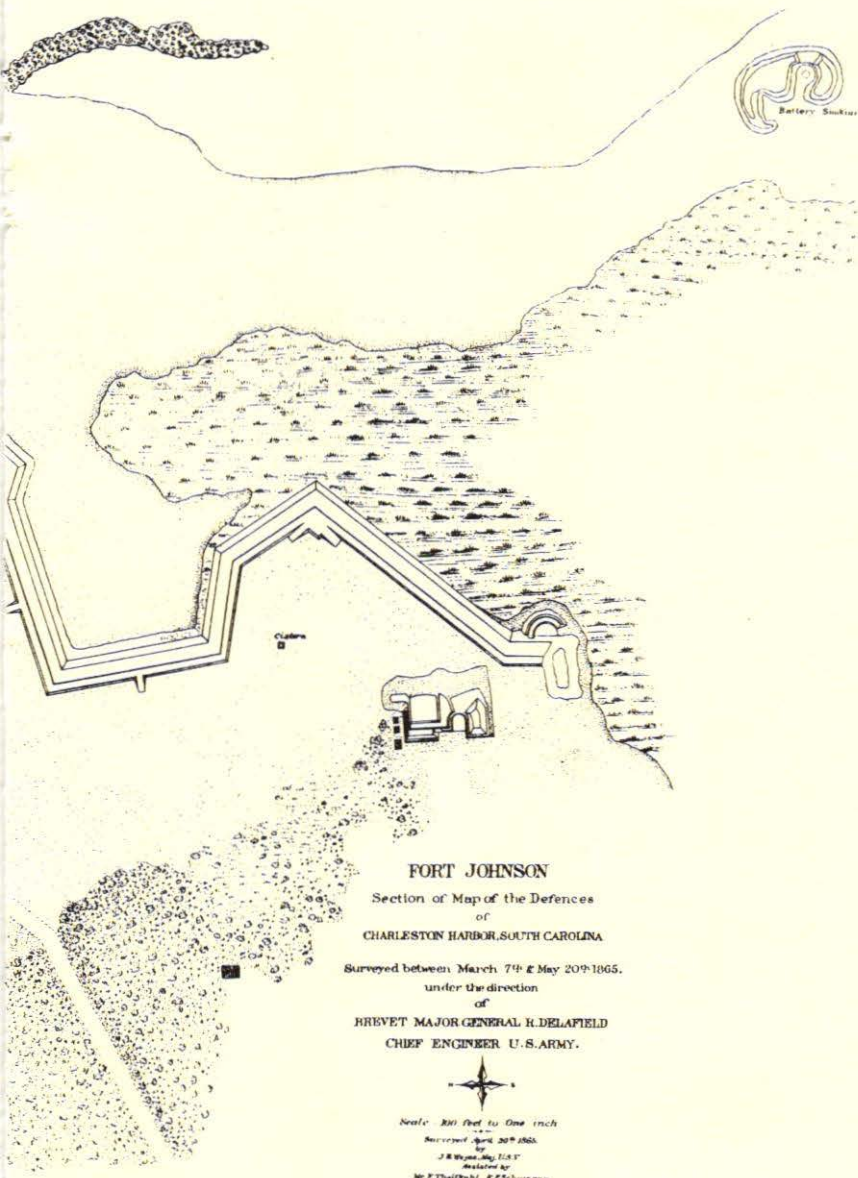
On the night of February 17, 1865 Fort Johnson and the associated batteries were evacuated as part of the general Confederate withdrawal from Charleston Harbor. The photograph on the next page shows how a portion of the fort appeared when occupied by Union forces. The chimneys are the remains of individual troop quarters and a landing is shown in the upper left hand corner.



This is an interior view of Fort Johnson taken in 1865. The chimney ruins are the remains of troop quarters and the large earthworks in the background are gun emplacements. The photograph was taken from atop the sand cap covering the magazine.



Map of Fort Johnson in 1865. The earthwork with the "star" on it was the magazine; the



gun emplacements and wharf to the west are the same shown in the photograph.

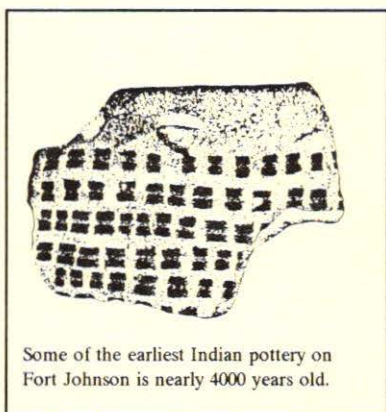
In 1889 Fort Johnson was converted into a quarantine station under the joint jurisdiction of the City of Charleston and the State. Vessels from ports with suspected contagions or with sickness on board were required to stop. Ballast would be unloaded and discarded on site, while the ships were washed with Mercuric Bichloride, a powerful (and poisonous) disinfectant and then fumigated with sulfur dioxide fumes. Bedding and clothing from the ships would be placed in a huge container and heated to a temperature of 240° F for 15 to 20 minutes.

The old military buildings were replaced by a dwelling houses for the quarantine officer, engineer, and captain of the launch. Also built were barracks for officers, female passengers, and the crews of vessels being detained. A "fever hospital" and "pest-house" were built for the ill, as well as storage buildings and warehouses.

In 1906, the U.S. Public Health Service took over these quarantine duties from the State and City, although the federal officers continued to operate Fort Johnson. The property was transferred to the College of Charleston and South Carolina Medical University in the 1950s. The majority of the property was transferred to the South Carolina Department of Wildlife and Marine Resources Department about 1970 for use as a research facility. A small portion of the property was retained by the College of Charleston for its Grice Marine Laboratory. The South Carolina Medical University kept title to a dwelling on the northeastern point which is today used for office space.

Today Fort Johnson is one of the largest and most sophisticated marine research and management facilities on the east coast. Programs are designed to explore a range of coastal problems and seek solutions to a variety of environmental and ecological problems.

It is therefore fitting that the S.C. Department of Wildlife and Marine Resources is also concerned about the unique historical and cultural resources of this 90 acre tract. In fact, Fort Johnson's 90 acres have been listed on the National Register of Historic Preservation. Recently Chicora Foundation has been asked to prepare an archaeological and historical survey of Fort Johnson so that planned expansion will not damage or destroy any of the properties significant resources. Not only have the various military and quarantine sites been identified and cataloged, but the tract's Native American sites, some dating to at least 4000 B.C., have also been found.



Some of the earliest Indian pottery on Fort Johnson is nearly 4000 years old.

What You Can See Today

Much of Fort Johnson's history is buried below the ground. For example, archaeologists from the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology in the early 1970s found that clues about the early 1759 and 1796 fortifications and structures are still preserved below the sod of Fort Johnson. While these remains aren't visible, there are many others which are and we hope you will take a few minutes to tour the property and see some of its amazing history.

The Marshlands House, while not original to the property, is an exceptional example of early antebellum architecture. Built by the Cooper River rice planter John Ball about 1810, the house is perhaps best known for its interior decorative carving. The house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Cisterns are large round "domes" of tabby originally built to collect rainwater from the roof of barracks built perhaps as early as 1790. They were intended to provide a reliable, and sanitary, source of water for the troops in the fort and were used through the Civil War (one is even shown in the photograph on page 3).

The Powder Magazine was built during the fort's renovations in 1812. It was reinforced with the buttresses you see today, as well as a second internal wall, to withstand the sand mounded on top of it by Confederate troops during the Civil War. It is the large mound designated by a star on the 1865 map reproduced on pages 4 and 5.

Earthworks are still visible throughout the property if you look for them. Many have been destroyed and others have been reduced in size through erosion, but if you are persistent you will be able to trace much of the Civil War history out on the ground here at Fort Johnson.

Help Preserve Our Resources

The historic resources at Fort Johnson belong to all of the citizens of South Carolina and they can be passed on to future generations only if we take responsible care of them. There are some individuals who want only to convert this heritage to their own private ownership by looting sites like Fort Johnson. They use metal detectors and shovels to steal our history so they can possess it or sell it to make a profit.

Help protect these resources. Please don't pick up the pieces of ceramics, bottle glass, and pottery you see -- they are clues that archaeologists need to accurately interpret the site. Also remember that vandalizing, damaging,

or destroying archaeological and historical resources on state property is a **crime**. Report anyone you see using a metal detector, digging up these sites, or stealing bricks to the nearest SC Wildlife and Marine Resources official.

For More Information

If you would like more information about the history of Fort Johnson and the Charleston area look for these books and articles at your local library:

Burton, E. Milby. 1970. *The Siege of Charleston, 1861-1865*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Keith, Willis J. 1975. Fort Johnson. *Civil War Times Illustrated* 15: 33-39.

Lipscomb, Terry W. 1991. *The Carolina Lowcountry, April 1775-June 1776*. Columbia: S.C. Department of Archives and History.

Mustard, Harry S. 1963. On the Building of Fort Johnson. *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 64: 129-135.

Rosen, Robert. 1982. *A Short History of Charleston*. San Francisco: Lexikos.

South, Stanley. 1975. *Fickle Forts on Windmill Point: Exploratory Archaeology at Fort Johnson, South Carolina*. S.C. Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology Research Manuscript Series 81. Columbia: University of South Carolina.

Trinkley, Michael, Natalie Adams, and Debi Hacker. 1994. *An Archaeological Survey of Fort Johnson and Windmill Point*. Chicora Foundation Research Series 43. Columbia: Chicora Foundation. (available July 1994)

What is Chicora Foundation?

Chicora began as a small, not-for-profit, public foundation nearly a decade ago, with the lofty mission of preserving the archaeological, historical, and cultural resources of the Carolinas.

Today that means a wealth of innovative programs.

Like our school programs explaining Black and Native American history to children. "How-to" workshops for adults interested in preserving quilts, photos, and family Bibles. And our collaborative archaeology projects with leading business partners such as Kiawah Resort Associates, International Paper, and The Litchfield Company to explore both the history and prehistory of our region.

Chicora Foundation is the leader in showing that preservation is not only essential for us as a people, but good business as well. And we remain at the cutting edge of Southern studies with our monograph series, talks at professional meetings, and museum assistance programs.

How can YOU help? Please don't let our fragile heritage become extinct through gradual loss. Join with us in studying the past and teaching it to our future generations. Your generous financial gift to Chicora is a visible expression of your commitment to saving and preserving the important cultural heritage of the Carolinas.



CHICORA FOUNDATION MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

As a member of Chicora Foundation, you help support heritage education programs in our school and community programs. In addition to that good feeling inside, you will also receive Chicora Foundation Research (a quarterly publication), an enameled Chicora logo pin, and a 10% discount on all Chicora publications.



Yes! Our rich heritage must be saved, and I can help.

Here is my tax-deductible gift to Chicora Foundation, Inc.
Please rush me the latest newsletter and Chicora logo pin.

☐ \$1000/Lifetime ☐ \$500/Benefactor ☐ \$250/Patron
☐ \$100/Sustaining ☐ \$35/Friend

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Telephone: (_____) _____

Please mail this form to: Chicora Foundation, Inc.
PO Box 8664
Columbia, SC 29205